

Union Political Activity Spans 230 Years Of U.S. History

AMERICAN FEDERATION OF LABOR AND
CONGRESS OF INDUSTRIAL ORGANIZATIONS



BETTMAN ARCHIVE



American labor went into politics as early as the 1730s. A political organization known as the "Caucus," composed mostly of shipyard workers but also including other artisans and shopkeepers, won for a time a firm grip on the town offices in Boston. Severe tightening of the currency during the 1740s, which lowered the income of Boston's workingmen, caused the Caucus to expand its horizons. An alliance of the Caucus and a party of debtor farmers secured control of the Massachusetts General Court, and established a land bank to provide relief through the issuance of paper money backed by real estate. The bank was later destroyed by the Board of Trade.

This early incident in a sense epitomizes the need for labor to participate in political affairs. To protect his wages and his pocketbook, the worker must do more than bargain with his employer. He must join together with other wage earners to secure a favorable political climate for advancing his economic interests.

This article is based on a brief filed by the AFL-CIO in a case before the U.S. Supreme Court involving the use of union dues paid under a union shop contract for political and legislative activities. The case is on appeal from the Supreme Court of the State of Georgia, which held that a union shop agreement under the Railway Labor Act is illegal if dues are used for such expenditures. The brief was prepared by the office of the AFL-CIO General Counsel, J. Albert Woll.

At times, especially in periods of business depression, this may mean securing direct government intervention. At all times the worker must realize that other powerful groups will also be seeking through organized political action to further their interests in opposition to his. This, too, the members of the Caucus found out.

In the middle of the Eighteenth Century political groups designed to protect civil liberties and to further the workers' demands for political equality with the privileged class sprang up in New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and other coastal towns. These groups were generally led by liberal-minded lawyers and merchants but the main body consisted of workingmen.

Such organizations provided impetus for the subsequent formation of the various Sons of Liberty groups, which during the late '60s played a major role in demonstrations against the Stamp Act, the Townshend Act, and other British measures viewed by the colonists as a threat to their economy and their liberty. For our purposes it is not necessary to trace in detail how workingmen helped counter the more conciliatory attitude of the merchants and landed gentry toward the repressive political measures of the British Parliament, thus paving the way for the Revolution.

President Woodrow Wilson, Samuel Gompers and Secretary of Labor William B. Wilson (left to right) in Washington in 1916.

Though numerous local labor organizations were formed to bargain with employers over wage scales and working rules, labor played an insignificant role in politics between the Revolutionary War and the late 1820s. But in May 1828 the Workingmen's Labor Party of Philadelphia became the first labor party in the modern world.

This was an outgrowth of the Philadelphia Mechanics' Union of Trade Associations which had been formed the previous year as a result of a strike of building trades mechanics for a 10-hour day. When nothing but failure greeted economic action, the demand for the 10-hour day took the form of a public employment plank in the political platform of the Workingmen's Party.

In 1829 New York workers formed a Workingmen's Party to protect the 10-hour day they had previously obtained. Compounded of Skidmore agrarianism and other elements, the New York workers' parties registered broad protests against economic exploitation as well as against degraded citizenship, strongly condemning the greater consideration given in legislation to the rich than to the poor.

Between 1831 and 1834 there existed in New England a new type of labor organization, partly political and partly economic, the New England Associa-



tion of Farmers, Mechanics and Other Workmen. Emerging out of the 10-hour movement, the organization soon broadened its objectives. Public education, especially of children in the factories, was assigned an importance equal to that of hours of labor.

All these workers' parties had short lives. But their efforts were not unavailing. Indeed, one of the principal reasons for their decline was that other established political parties took up the causes that they had most vigorously espoused. To these early political efforts by organized workingmen has been

attributed a large share of the credit for the establishment of the public school system, the initiation of currency reforms, the abolition of imprisonment for debt, the passage of mechanics' lien laws, and the removal from unions of the stigma of criminal conspiracy.

In the mid-Nineteenth Century one of organized labor's primary aims was the establishment of the 10-hour day. Two distinct lines of attack were followed: the first consisting of legislative appeals, and the second of trade union action. During the 1840s the first was most utilized; direct trade union demands upon employers for the 10-hour day did not become prominent until the '50s. As a result of numerous insistent petitions to the legislatures from labor groups and their sympathizers, various kinds of 10-hour laws were passed in New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Rhode Island, California, and Georgia.

The phenomenal industrial expansion of the United States in the second half of the Nineteenth Century made it increasingly clear that "labor had to meet the challenge of nationwide industry by itself organizing on a nationwide basis." In 1866 delegates from various local unions, trades assemblies, and national unions met in Baltimore and organized the National Labor Union. Legislative action to secure the 8-hour day was the principal aim of the NLU. Currency reform was also assigned high priority.

Throughout its six-year existence, the NLU was continually engaged in lobbying activities before Congress and state legislatures for an 8-hour law. In 1868 Congress passed an 8-hour law for government employes and a law prohibiting further contraction of the currency, thus answering to a considerable extent the demands of the NLU. Eight-hour legislation was also passed in six states, but its value proved illusory.

After the great strikes of July 1877, in which workingmen found themselves confronted by hostile state and federal troops, numerous workingmen's political parties appeared in all the industrial centers of the nation. A Greenback-Labor Party was formed with a platform advocating currency reforms, shorter hours, national and state bureaus of labor statistics, prohibition of convict labor, and the suspension of the importation of servile labor.

The aggregate Greenback-Labor vote in 1878 exceeded a million, and 14 candidates were elected to Congress. Independent political action by labor nearly succeeded in electing Henry George in the New York City mayoralty election of 1886; more significantly, the strong showing made by the labor forces resulted in the state legislature's passing a considerable number of protective labor laws.

In 1881 a hundred representatives of national and local unions and regional and local assemblies

formed the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions of the United States and Canada. This was the forerunner of the American Federation of Labor, which formally came into existence in 1886. The 1881 conference drew up a 13-point legislative program.

Almost from the outset the American Federation of Labor adopted the pattern of non-partisan political action championed by its president, Samuel Gompers. But this meant only that the federation would not establish an independent party or ally itself with any political party. The AFL continued to seek the election of persons sympathetic to its needs and to press for legislation favorable to the worker.

At the convention of 1893 the federation adopted a political platform containing 11 planks. Among other things the program called for compulsory education, a legal 8-hour day, government inspection of mines and workshops, employer liability for injuries on the job, and the abolition of the sweating system.

The efforts of the AFL, together with the efforts of the Knights of Labor, the Populists, and various reform groups, were responsible for a substantial body of state labor legislation, which was enacted between 1886 and 1900. This dealt primarily with labor arbitration, child labor and women's labor, factory and mine safety, responsibility for industrial accidents, and the 8-hour day.

The historical survey and analysis of the political and legislative activities of American labor contained in the brief filed by the AFL-CIO is drawn from a series of authoritative volumes on the history of American labor and its political activities. For those who desire to read further in this area these are the volumes:

Bakke and Kerr, "Unions, Management and the Public"

Commons and Associates, "History of Labor"

Daugherty and Parrish, "Labor Problems of American Society"

Derber and Young, "Labor and the New Deal"

Dulles, "Labor in America"

Frankfurter and Greene, "The Labor Injunction"

Gregory, "Labor and the Law"

Hardman and Neufeld, "The House of Labor"

Karson, "American Labor Unions and Politics"

Lester, "As Unions Mature"

Millis and Montgomery, "Organized Labor"

Overacker, "Presidential Campaign Funds"

Perlman and Taft, "History of Labor"

Rayback, "American Labor"

Reynolds, "Labor Economics and Labor Relations"

Schlesinger, "The Coming of the New Deal"

Taft, "The A.F. of L. from the Death of Gompers to the Merger"

Taft, "The A.F. of L. in the Time of Gompers."

Unionism was flourishing at the turn of the century. Then abruptly the tide changed. Between 1902 and 1905 various employer groups launched a many-pronged "mass offensive" against the unions, proposing "to obliterate the whole concept of an organized labor movement from the pattern of American life." Stiffening of attitudes at the bargaining table and a nation-wide campaign for the "open shop" were only the beginning.

The press and the academic world were systematically enlisted to convince the public that "the enormous Labor Trust is the heaviest oppressor of the independent workingman;" yet this appeal in the name of labor's rights only "thinly disguised an all-out drive against both union recognition and collective bargaining."

Spearheading the attack was the National Association of Manufacturers. In 1902 the NAM caused the defeat of labor-supported 8-hour and anti-injunction bills before Congress. And in the 1904 elections the NAM scored signal successes in its efforts "to cut off labor's influence at the source by defeating congressmen and senators favorable to labor." As a final blow, the unions about this time suffered a series of crippling reverses in the courts, through the application of injunctions and the anti-trust laws.

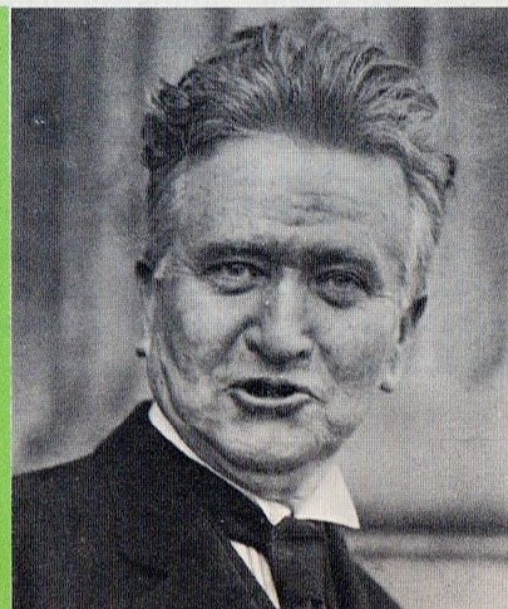
In 1906 the AFL responded to the onslaught by presenting a "Bill of Grievances" to Congress and the President, protesting against the failure to enact an effective 8-hour law, the abuse of the injunction, and

the perversion of anti-trust laws. Obtaining no satisfaction, the federation then took more direct steps and campaigned actively to defeat labor's enemies in the elections of 1906, 1908, 1910, and 1912.

These efforts bore fruit. In 1914 Congress passed the Clayton Act and supplied unions with a measure of relief against labor injunctions and the anti-trust laws. A year later the AFL gained one of its long-sought objectives, a federal law granting rights and protection to seamen on vessels of American registry. And during the pre-war heyday of the progressive movement organized labor successfully supported the enactment of a vast quantity of state labor legislation.

The pendulum once more swung against labor in the decade after the first World War. Strike after

In 1924 the
AFL endorsed
Sen. Robert
La Follette, Sr.,
for president.



strike collapsed because, it was said, "the power of public opinion had strongly and definitely crystallized in favor of federal, state and local police intervention in support of the employers and against the workers."

Organized labor's most conspicuous political move during this period was its vigorous support of the independent candidacy of Robert La Follette in the presidential election of 1924. The movement polled nearly 5 million votes, and had a significant by-product: in 1926 the Congress elected in the La Follette campaign enacted the Railway Labor Act.

The depression which swept the country in the wake of the stock-market crash of 1929 was almost immediately reflected in the elections of 1930. The new Congress, much concerned with labor welfare, studied dozens of bills for public works programs, for maximum work-hours, and for other means of federal relief. In 1932 labor's 40-year campaign against the indiscriminate use of the labor injunction was crowned with success through the passage of the Norris-La Guardia Act.

But the spectacular renaissance of American unionism was to await the coming of the New Deal. The AFL officially maintained neutrality in the 1932 presidential campaign; however, there is no doubt that the labor vote contributed significantly to the victory of the new movement.

The most important single expression of the pro-labor policy generally pursued under the New Deal

was the passage in 1935 of the Wagner Act, protecting workers' rights to organize and bargain collectively. The Wagner Act was passed after a measure for safeguarding labor's organizational rights had been strongly urged upon Congress by President William Green of the AFL and by other union leaders. The Chamber of Commerce, the National Association of Manufacturers, and other industry groups had opposed such a bill.

Labor support of the New Deal during the congressional elections of 1934 also played a role in the passage of the Wagner Act and other favorable legislation. New Deal welfare measures generally supported by organized labor included the Social Security Act and public works programs.

In the 1936 campaign labor groups, especially affiliates of the newly formed Congress of Industrial Organizations, invested a total of \$770,000. The funds were divided among various political committees and organizations, but substantially all went to aid in the re-election of Roosevelt. Labor was continuing its traditional policy of furthering its cause by helping out its friends.

The highly publicized role played by the CIO's Political Action Committee in the 1944 campaign was partially responsible for a thorough investigation by a special Senate committee on expenditures in the federal elections of that year. The findings were a striking refutation of any suggestion of undue union influence. Democratic and Republican organizations

and committees spent a total of \$20,637,177. Labor expenditures were tabulated as follows:

From union contributions to	
CIO-PAC	\$478,498.82
From individual contributions to	
CIO-PAC	470,852.32
National Citizens-PAC	378,424.78
Total PAC	\$1,327,775.92
Other labor groups	252,481.18
Total all labor	\$1,580,257.10

The total labor expenditure of \$1.6 million, including both union dues and individual contributions, thus accounted for only 7.7 percent of the total Republican and Democratic federal expenditures of \$20.6 million.

An even more startling revelation is that in the same 1944 elections, 242 individuals representing 64 family groups made direct contributions to political organizations in the amount of \$1,277,121. This means that expenditures on behalf of many millions of workers only slightly exceeded the contributions made by 64 families.

The immediate postwar years saw a vigorous resumption of collective bargaining. Engrossed in se-

curing wage increases, unions made little effort to secure a large vote in the 1946 congressional elections. Only 33 million voted and labor was dealt its worst defeat since the inauguration of the New Deal. A year later the full dimensions of labor's political setback were revealed by the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act. The new Act followed in large degree the suggestions of the National Association of Manufacturers—which later reported it had spent over \$4 million during 1947 in what appear to be propaganda-connected activities.

The enactment of the Taft-Hartley law spurred the AFL on to renewed political activity, and led to the creation of Labor's League for Political Education. An intensive campaign by the League and the CIO-PAC brought out the labor vote in unprecedented numbers in 1948, assisting in the surprise re-election of President Truman. But labor failed to achieve its primary purpose of repealing the Taft-Hartley Act.

In 1952 the AFL formally endorsed the presidential candidacy of Adlai E. Stevenson. In announcing its support, the federation cited the need to replace the Taft-Hartley Act, to develop a public low-rent housing program, to extend social security, and to establish a health insurance program.

The CIO also endorsed Stevenson in 1952. The endorsement was repeated in 1956 by the newly merged AFL-CIO. Labor generally had found unsatisfactory the record of the Eisenhower Administra-

tion on unemployment, taxes, housing, federal aid to education, and fiscal and monetary measures. Redress once again was sought at the polls.

Political contributions and expenditures relating to the 1956 general election campaigns were subjected to a most comprehensive senatorial study. Tabulations of the findings follow:

Direct Political Expenditures in 1956 Elections

	Amount	Percent
Republican	\$20,685,387	62.3
Democratic	10,977,790	33.1
Labor	941,271	2.8
Miscellaneous	581,277	1.8
Totals	\$33,185,725	100

Individual and Group Contributions of \$500 or More in 1956 Elections

Of Twelve Selected Families to:

Republicans	\$1,040,526
Democrats	107,109
Other	6,100
Total	\$1,153,735

Of Officials of 225 Largest Corporations to:

Republicans	\$1,816,597
Democrats	103,725
Other	16,525
Total	\$1,936,847

CONGRESSIONAL RECORD

EXHIBIT 11—1956 CONTRIBUTIONS OF 12 SELECTED FAMILIES

Family	Total	Republican	Democratic	Miscellaneous
du Pont.....	\$248,423	\$248,423		
Field.....	33,500	7,500	\$23,000	\$3,000
Ford.....	36,899	36,899		
Harriman.....	38,850	34,350	4,500	
Lehman.....	39,500	14,000	23,500	2,000
Mellon.....	100,150	100,150		
Olin.....	53,550	53,550		
Pew.....	216,800	216,800		
Reynolds.....	49,609		49,609	
Rockefeller.....	152,604	152,604		
Vanderbilt.....	62,400	54,800	6,500	1,100
Whitney.....	121,450	121,450		
Total.....	1,153,735	1,010,526	107,109	6,100

CONGRESSIONAL RECORD

	Republican	Democratic	Miscellaneous
Ford Motor Co.:			
Beech, Ernest R., Dearborn, Mich.....	2,000		
Eugas, John S., Dearborn, Mich.....	3,000		
David, Donald K., New York, N. Y.....	1,000		
Ford, Benson, Dearborn, Mich.....	3,000		
Ford, Henry, II, Dearborn, Mich.....	18,899		
Ford, William C., Dearborn, Mich.....	(W 2,500)		
Gossett, William T., Dearborn, Mich.....	6,000		
Moore, C. F., Jr., Dearborn, Mich.....	1,000		
Total.....	500		
	35,399		

Of Officials of 13 Professional, Business,
and Similar Groups to:

Republicans	\$741,189
Democrats	8,000
Other	2,725

Total \$751,914

Of Labor Groups to:

Democrats	\$1,074,927
Republicans	3,925

Total \$1,078,852

Of National and International Union
Officials to:

Democrats	\$16,500
Republicans	2,500

Total \$19,000

As can be seen, the political contributions of a mere dozen families of means exceeded the total direct political expenditures by workers during the 1956 campaign. If labor's direct expenditures are added to its political contributions, the total still barely exceeds \$2 million. This is almost entirely offset just by the contributions of the officials of the 225 largest corporations. And the total labor outlay of \$2 million was merely 6.4 percent of the \$31.7 million spent by the Republican and Democratic parties and their candidates in the 1956 election.

When it is considered that 12 families in the United States are capable of bringing to bear in an election campaign well over half as much money as organized labor, which represents 16 million workingmen and their families, some idea may be grasped of the magnitude of the task faced by workers in presenting their views to the public and in seeking the election of persons sympathetic to their interests.

CONGRESSIONAL RECORD			
	Republi- can	Demo- cratic	Miscella- neous
General Electric Co.:			
Boulware, Lemuel R., New York, N. Y.	1,000		
Colt, S. Sloan, Schenectady, N. Y.	1,500		
Cordiner, Ralph J., New York, N. Y.	1,500		
David, Donald K., New York, N. Y.	1,000		
Dickey, Charles D., New York, N. Y.	2,000		
Ford, Henry, II, Detroit, Mich.	{ 18,899 }		
	{ (W 2,500) }		
Humphrey, Gilbert W., Schenectady, N. Y.	500		
LaPierre, Cramer W., New York, N. Y.	500		
Lockton, John D., New York, N. Y.	500		
Love, George H., Pittsburgh, Pa.	5,200		
McCabe, Thomas B., Chester, Pa.	19,500		
Morgan, Henry S., New York, N. Y.	5,300		
Reed, Philip D., New York, N. Y.	2,000		
Stringham, Warde B., Chevy Chase, Md.	1,000		
Weinberg, Sidney J., New York, N. Y.	2,500		
Woodruff, Robert W., Atlanta, Ga.	{ 5,450 }		
	{ (W 3,000) }		
Total.....	68,349		

CONGRESSIONAL RECORD			
	Republi- can	Demo- cratic	Miscella- neous
Westinghouse Electric Corp.:			
Boshell, Edward O., Pittsburgh, Pa.	500		
Burnham, Donald C., Pittsburgh, Pa.	2,300		
Denton, Frank R., Pittsburgh, Pa.	1,500		
Fort, Tomlinson, Jr., Pittsburgh, Pa.	1,000		
Headlee, C. E., Pittsburgh, Pa.	500		
Higgins, H. B., Pittsburgh, Pa.	2,000		
Hopkinson, Edward, Jr., Philadelphia, Pa.	1,000		
Hutcheson, J. A., Pittsburgh, Pa.	700		
Jewell, J. H., Pittsburgh, Pa.	700		
Lynde, Leslie E., Pittsburgh, Pa.	1,000		
Mahn, George G., Pittsburgh, Pa.	1,400		
McCully, L. B., Pittsburgh, Pa.	700		
Myers, John F., Pittsburgh, Pa.	800		
Page, Arthur W., New York, N. Y.	1,000		
Patterson, William A., Chicago, Ill.	1,000		
Price, Gwilym A., Carnegie, Pa.	1,500		
Robertson, A. W., Pittsburgh, Pa.	2,500		
Robinson, William C., Sewickley, Pa.	600		
Rowland, William C., Philadelphia, Pa.	500		
Schiff, John M., New York, N. Y.	{ 18,550 }		
	{ (W 3,000) }		
Weaver, C. H., Pittsburgh, Pa.	1,000		
Weber, C. S., Silver Spring, Md.	1,000		
Total.....	41,750		

Labor today must attempt to operate while affluent pressure groups with opposing interests expend ever increasing amounts to achieve their purposes through political action. For example, between 1947 and 1950, General Motors gave more than \$4.5 million to tax-exempt propaganda organizations and trade associations. In 1949-1950 the American Medical Association undertook to amass a \$3.5 million "political war chest" in its successful campaign to defeat the Truman medical insurance program, which was favored by organized labor.

In the not unusual year of 1954 over \$2 million of the NAM's budget went for a "public information program." And at all times employers and employer-minded groups have an influence over the media of mass communication wholly unmatched by the workingman.

By contrast, during the crucial fiscal year preceding the passage of the labor-opposed Landrum-Griffin bill in 1959, which also covered a period of nationwide efforts to enact state "right-to-work" laws, the AFL-CIO's Legislative Department and its Committee on Political Education together spent a total of only \$1.15 million.

The preceding historical sketch provides an empirical demonstration that political and legislative activity is an essential part of any realistic effort by workers to improve and maintain their bargaining position, and to secure an atmosphere favorable to

their general economic and social advancement. But we need not rely upon our own interpretation of the data available. A host of disinterested labor economists stand ready to verify this conclusion.

Professor Lloyd G. Reynolds of Yale sums up the matter in this way:

"It is often debated whether unions should 'go into politics'; really, they have no choice in the matter. They are automatically in politics because they exist under a legal and political system which has been generally critical of union activities. The conspiracy suit and the injunction judge have been a problem for unions from earliest times. A minimum of political activity is essential in order that unions may be able to engage in collective bargaining on even terms."

In addition to emphasizing that labor cannot even engage effectively in collective bargaining without a certain amount of political action, Reynolds discusses two other practical reasons for labor political activity. First, certain objectives in which labor has an interest cannot be achieved at all through collective bargaining. These include public education, social insurance of various kinds, adequate housing, and effective anti-depression measures.

Secondly, certain objectives which might be achieved through collective bargaining can be achieved much faster through legislation. This category embraces legislation covering minimum wages, maximum hours, and the elimination of child labor. Reynolds assigns prime responsibility for the progress of social

legislation to the "increasing political awareness of trade unions." At the same time, however, he concludes that the increase in the political influence of organized labor has been offset by a simultaneous increase in lobbying by groups directly opposed to labor. The net result is that the workers' political power "is still not very great vis-a-vis other groups."

Two other scholars, Daugherty of Northwestern and Parrish of Illinois, give as the reason for unionists' interest in politics their recognition of "their inability to cope with anti-union employers on equal terms on the economic field, [and] * * * their inability to protect their members against the vicissitudes of depression," together with their discovery of "what a great difference a favorable government made in their fortunes."

Princeton economist Richard A. Lester even defines a labor union in political terms, stating that it is "a political organization representing the members' job interests and their viewpoints on political and social issues." He emphasizes that unions "perform

educational functions and help to reconcile conflicts of interest," and so serve "a beneficial role in a democratic society."

We submit that there is no constitutional question in this case because there is no governmental action involved in a union's use of its funds for political activities. At the very most we find "questions not of constitutional validity but of policy in a domain of legislation peculiarly open to conflicting views of policy."

If Congress in permitting the union shop in the railroad industry has somehow tinged union political spending with a trace of governmental color, then we say: a wealth of historical and economic data nevertheless establishes that such spending, under the circumstances, is not unreasonable or arbitrary, but rather a means having a real and substantial relation to the economic advancement of the worker via stable collective bargaining.

AMERICAN FEDERATION OF LABOR AND CONGRESS OF INDUSTRIAL ORGANIZATIONS

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